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# The Returned Yank as Site of Memory in Irish Popular Culture

ANN SCHOFIELD

This article examines the figure of the Returned Yank in Irish popular culture to explain the contradiction between the Irish preoccupation with the figure of the emigrant who returns and the low number of emigrants who actually do return to their native land. The article argues that the Returned Yank is a *lieu de mémoire* or site of memory – a concept defined by French historian Pierre Nora as “any significant entity, whether material or non-material in nature, which by dint of human will or the work of time has become a symbolic element of the memorial heritage of any community” and used by scholars of African American and other cultures with particular concerns about memory and history. As a site of memory, the Irish Returned Yank allows the Irish to explore the meaning of massive population loss, the relationship with a diasporic population of overseas Irish, and tensions between urban and rural life. The article also suggests a relationship between Irish national identity and the Returned Yank.

In 1955 Arnold Schrier, an enterprising American researcher, convinced the Irish Folklore Commission to collect information on Irish emigration to the United States. The Folklore Commission, deeply invested at that time in the creation of an Irish national identity independent of American influence, reluctantly agreed. The Commission deployed field agents into Irish villages, largely in the west and south, armed with a questionnaire written by Schrier. Interviewers asked thirteen questions of all interviewees concerning aspects of emigration to America – the American “wake,” the “American letter,” motives for emigrating, and more. Question number ten elicited informants’ memories of “Returned Yanks”:

A considerable number of emigrants often returned for a visit to their native land. Did they create a favourable impression? Were they sought after for information on America? Are there any stories about the experiences of emigrants to America? Did they try to persuade others to emigrate? Was their clothing admired and habits of dress copied? Did they cause resentment because of bragging or “showing off” their wealth?<sup>1</sup>

This straightforward enquiry brought memories of emigrants who had returned to visit or to stay and created a composite figure of the Returned

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<sup>1</sup> Irish Folklore Commission Questionnaires, MS 1407.

Yank who now strides across the pages of oral history transcripts held in the National Folklore Collection, University College, Dublin.<sup>2</sup> Schrier himself incorporated data collected about the Returned Yank into a pathbreaking 1958 book about Irish immigration.<sup>3</sup> His conclusion that “the impact of the Returned Yank on rural society was a negligible one” is what I will take issue with in this article. While Schrier is probably correct that the “minute” numbers of returning emigrants failed to change the dress or work habits of their old neighbors, I contend that the presence of the Returned Yank motif in Irish popular culture before and after the survey was taken provided the Irish with a cultural site where they assessed the cost and benefit of massive and ongoing population loss. The site offered the Irish a way of constructing an Irish identity distinct from, yet in reference to, the diasporic Irish.<sup>4</sup> I argue that the Returned Yank of these interviews – along with songs, novels, commentaries, and other areas of Irish popular culture – is a site of memory, offering a cultural location that allows Irish culture to remember and accommodate the historical trauma of massive population loss, arguably the central feature of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Irish social history. The presence of the Returned Yank in Irish popular culture before the survey and its persistence afterwards point to a resilient cultural meaning beyond Schrier’s unambivalent use of the Yank as historical “evidence.”

Moreover, I suggest that the Yank appears in Irish popular culture at times of particular concern for Irish national identity. The Folklore Commission survey, for example, took place in 1955, a time when Ireland stepped up development of its critically important tourist industry. Eager to welcome visitors, especially those with well-lined pockets, tourist board promotional material constructed an idyllic Ireland filled with pastel-colored villages and friendly natives.<sup>5</sup> Significantly, yet independently, the tourist board and the Folklore Commission asked the Irish to consider their relation to visitors in the 1950s.

<sup>2</sup> This manuscript collection consists of twenty-six one-hundred-page notebooks. Twenty-six interviewers asked thirteen questions concerning emigration to America in sixteen counties. The manuscript collection is now available in digitized form through the Irish Virtual Research Library and Archive (IVRLA). Archivist Criostoir Mac Carthaigh provided invaluable assistance in accessing the archive.

<sup>3</sup> Arnold Schrier, *Ireland and the American Migration, 1850–1900* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1958).

<sup>4</sup> Mark Wyman writes, in disagreement with Schrier, “the overall record leaves no doubt that America was prominent in the drive for Ireland’s independence, and return migration was one of the crucial ingredients.” Mark Wyman, *Round-Trip to America: The Immigrants Return to Europe* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), 166.

<sup>5</sup> Eric G. E. Zuelow, *Making Ireland Irish: Tourism and National Identity since the Irish Civil War* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2009).

With that sort of convergence of events in mind, I will set the remembered Returned Yank of the Folklore Commission survey and the fictional Returned Yank of Irish popular culture against the backdrop of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Irish history. I argue that the Yank in both the survey and popular culture functions as a *lieu de mémoire* (site of memory), the notion defined by French cultural historian Pierre Nora as “any significant entity, whether material or non-material in nature, which by dint of human will or the work of time has become a symbolic element of the memorial heritage of any community.”<sup>6</sup> Although cultural critic Marita Sturken and others fault Nora for what they term his “nostalgia,”<sup>7</sup> other scholars have creatively picked up on the site-of-memory concept in reference to African American culture.<sup>8</sup> Essayists in the anthology *History and Memory in African-American Culture*, like Nora, analyze cemeteries, monuments, and commemorative celebrations while others expand the notion of site of memory to find meaning in dance, novels, autobiographies, fiction, and other cultural artifacts. In a similar vein, I will examine the meaning of the Returned Yank for the Irish and the Irish of the diaspora, paying particular attention to the productive interplay of history – a professionally created narrative of the past – and memory – the past that emerges from or is created by oral histories, fiction, songs, and other cultural material. Fanciful as the Returned Yank figure can be, it cannot be dissociated from the history of the emigrants who left and sometimes returned to Ireland throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The small numbers of Irish returnees in contrast to those returning to other European countries underscores the cultural rather than literal significance of the Returned Yank phenomenon. The question that the site-of-memory concept can answer, in other words, is why is the *history* of returned emigration to Ireland so small yet the *memory* of the Returned Yank so prominent an aspect of Irish culture?

Tracking the Returned Yank through the twentieth century, the Yank emerges as a chameleon character, plastic enough to correspond to changing

<sup>6</sup> Pierre Nora, *Realms of Memory: Rethinking the French Past*, 3 vols. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996–8). In this, Nora’s principal work, essayists write on subjects as diverse as Jansenists, the St.-Malo–Geneva line, and the village church as aspects of French national identity. See also Hue-Tam Ho Tai, “Remembered Realms: Pierre Nora and French National Memory,” *American Historical Review*, 106 (June 2001), 906–22.

<sup>7</sup> Marita Sturken, *Tangled Memories: The Vietnam War, the AIDS Epidemic, and the Politics of Remembering* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

<sup>8</sup> Robert O’Meally and Genevieve Fabre, eds., *History and Memory in African-American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 7. O’Meally and Fabre further explain, “a *lieu de mémoire* may be historical or legendary, event or figure, a book or an era, a place or an idea”; it can be “simple and ambiguous, natural and artificial, at once immediately available in sensuous experience and susceptible to the most abstract elaboration,” nonetheless it is “material, symbolic, and functional.”

historical situations, yet with discernibly consistent characteristics. Scholars who have commented on the plasticity of sites of memory contend that “*lieux de mémoire* are constantly evolving into new configurations of meaning and that their constant revision makes them part of the dynamism of the historical process.”<sup>9</sup> In other words, history and memory consistently interact in any site of memory.

My argument for the significance of the Returned Yank as an Irish site of memory during particularly critical times of state formation and heightened Irish nationalism in the twentieth century begins with an examination of the unique contours of Irish migration, particularly to the United States. My article then articulates between an analysis of cultural representations of the Returned Yank in such cultural artefacts as the Folklore Commission survey, novels, songs, and John Ford’s iconic film *The Quiet Man* and historical change in Ireland and suggests a creative tension between history and those cultural representations.

Between 1820 and 1920, some 4.7 million Irish women and men emigrated from Ireland to the United States.<sup>10</sup> At first, the story of this massive population shift from Ireland to the United States and elsewhere appears simple and well known – a demographic crisis caused by a population explosion followed by famine of unprecedented magnitude that scarred nineteenth-century Irish history and reshaped Irish society through its effects on marriage, the family, and religious life. Massive out-migration was the response to the crisis – throughout the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth, Ireland hemorrhaged people, creating, by former Irish President Mary McAleese’s estimate, a diasporic population of 70 million people of Irish descent worldwide.<sup>11</sup>

Less well known than the famine migration is the nature of pre- and post-famine Irish immigration. Before 1814, two-thirds of the 100,000 to 150,000 who left Ireland were Ulster Protestants; between 1815 and 1844, the immediate pre-famine period, the 800,000 to one million who left Ireland bound for the United States included more Catholics than Protestants, and those more driven by desperate poverty than those simply eager to improve themselves. The potato famine that ravaged Ireland between 1845 and 1855 created a flood tide of migrants remarkable for its size and pathos. Yet the numbers of post-famine migrants who left Ireland between 1856 and 1921,

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 8–9.

<sup>10</sup> Between 1848 and 1851, one million fled the Irish Potato Famine. Patrick J. Blessing, “The Irish,” in Stephan Thernstrom *et al.*, eds., *Harvard Encyclopedia of American Ethnic Groups* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980), 528.

<sup>11</sup> Speech of Irish President Mary McAleese at the opening of the Irish Hunger Memorial, 16 July 2002, accessed 18 Oct. 2012, available at [www/emsc.nysed.gov/nyssa/gif/mcaleese%20speech%20at%20hunger%20memorial.htm](http://www.emsc.nysed.gov/nyssa/gif/mcaleese%20speech%20at%20hunger%20memorial.htm).

motivated by “developments in Irish agriculture and industry which made life at home untenable,”<sup>12</sup> eclipsed the famine generation. Historian Kerby Miller reminds us that “between 1856 and 1921 . . . more Irishmen and -women left their native land than in the preceding two and a half centuries.”<sup>13</sup> Miller explains the role that ongoing Irish customs of inheritance and dowry among the people of western Ireland played in that flood of migrants:

they still pursued and realized traditional communal goals: persistence on the land and early marriage. To be sure, western peasants’ adoption of impartible inheritance meant that such traditional goals were now unattainable for noninheritors. After 1881 their marriage opportunities declined dramatically and their emigration rates soared.<sup>14</sup>

This massive and ongoing migration radically altered Irish society and implicitly raises the question how a culture accommodates the trauma of the repeated loss of generations. I contend that the significance of the Returned Yank, this figure and the discourse surrounding it, in part, enabled the Irish to mediate the historical fact of extraordinary population loss with the memory of children, neighbors, and fellow villagers who had left them.

From the vantage point of the United States, Irish numbers comprise one of the most significant ethnic groups in America, particularly in the early decades of the nineteenth century; between 1820 and 1840, one-third of all immigrants to the United States came from Ireland; and in the 1840s, 45 percent of immigrants originated in Ireland.<sup>15</sup> Employers recruited the Irish, particularly to low-waged industrial work in New England mill towns, and, as with most immigrant groups, chain migration facilitated immigration and helped immigrants settle in the New World. As their numbers swelled, the Irish, like other groups, concentrated in specifically urban occupations – for men, municipal positions such as construction workers, police, and firefighters; for women – who, unlike virtually all other immigrant groups, outnumbered men – overwhelmingly domestic service.<sup>16</sup> Irishmen soon dominated the Roman Catholic clergy, with effects that continue to present time.<sup>17</sup> Over time, they developed the distinct hyphenate identity of “Irish-American.”

<sup>12</sup> Kerby A. Miller, *Emigrants and Exiles: Ireland and the Irish Exodus to North America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 345.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 345. Miller underscores the “largely . . . economic reasons” for this migration.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 475.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 528. By the twentieth century these numbers dropped dramatically. Between 1911 and 1920, only 2.5% of all immigrants to the United States came from Ireland (still the impressive number of 146,000).

<sup>16</sup> Haisa Diner, *Erin’s Daughters in America: Irish Immigrant Women in the Nineteenth Century* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983); Janet A. Nolan, *Ourselves Alone: Women’s Emigration from Ireland, 1885–1920* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1989).

<sup>17</sup> Historians David Roediger and Noel Ignatiev, among others, have shown that as the Irish “became white” in America they were complicit in reinforcing the subjugation of African

Less familiar than the tale of Irish emigration to the United States is the story of return migration to Ireland.<sup>18</sup> By contrast with southern Europeans such as Italians or Greeks, who returned in substantial numbers to their homelands or followed the “birds of passage” pattern – coming to America for work, returning home when times were hard, then coming back to America when the economy improved – the Irish tended to settle in America, send money home, but remain in their new country.<sup>19</sup> Historian Mark Wyman tells us that fewer than 10 percent of the Irish who emigrated to the United States after the famine generation ever returned home to stay.<sup>20</sup>

Even the dramatic alteration in Ireland’s political culture in the twentieth century failed to draw significant numbers back to their homeland. In 1916, Irish rebels proclaimed the Irish Republic, 1922 witnessed the establishment of the Irish Free State, and 1948 saw the foundation of the Republic of Ireland. Within decades a nation-state emerged out of twenty-six Irish counties, while six counties in Northern Ireland continued to send representatives to the British parliament, albeit Northern Ireland now has a devolved government and its own first minister. The violence of civil war wracked Ireland in the early twentieth century; and terrorism waged by the Irish Republican Army (IRA) and Irish Loyalists still continues in both Northern Ireland and the Republic.

There is ample evidence that Irish Americans helped finance the Irish Revolution – some estimate that support at one million dollars – and prominent returned Yanks included two of the fifteen leaders of the Easter Rising, James Connolly and Tom Clarke.<sup>21</sup> But most Irish who returned after 1916 seemed less motivated by incipient nationalism and more by personal concerns. Some sought relief from the “land of bosses and clocks,” being unable or unwilling to adjust to the rhythms of industrial labor. Others found dreary coal mining districts and soulless cities a far cry from America’s promised riches. Some returned as failures, others had fulfilled their dreams of economic success. Writing tongue in cheek, historian Mark Wyman says, “in Killarney it was later claimed that every pub was run by a ‘Yank,’ someone back from America.”<sup>22</sup>

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Americans. David R. Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (New York and London: Verso, 1991); Noel Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White* (New York: Routledge, Chapman, and Hall, 1995).

<sup>18</sup> On European return migration generally see Wyman, *Round-Trip to America*.

<sup>19</sup> Patrick J. Blessing points out, “Large-scale Irish peasant movement to the New World, therefore, was not a mindless flight from intolerable conditions, but, within the limited range of alternatives, a deliberate departure of generally literate individuals who were very much concerned with the survival and well-being of friends remaining at home.” Blessing, 530.

<sup>20</sup> Wyman, 10.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 165.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.



Were all Killarney publicans Yanks, or, asked more realistically, did Irish returning from America, whatever their numbers, assume prominent roles in local communities? It appears not. Irishmen who returned largely bought farms or reassumed their place on family farms. Women married and assumed traditional roles as housewives and mothers.

If returning emigrants were few in number and made little impact on their home communities, then what does the Folklore Commission survey tell us about Irish history, particularly the history of Irish emigration? Given the specificity of the survey questions, we could easily dismiss the observations of those interviewed by saying the Returned Yank exists because the questionnaire constructed by Schrier invented the Yank. Once the question about the Returned Yank was asked, people identified and described returned emigrants according to some familiar cultural script since the stock figure of the Returned Yank was part of Irish culture long before the 1955 survey, as was the phenomenon of returning emigrants. But it is precisely the ubiquity of the Returned Yank in Irish culture that gives meaning to the material in the survey. In 1955, Ireland sought to construct itself as a nostalgic tourist destination, and in that same year, *The Quiet Man*, the quintessential film representation of the Returned Yank, was released. Let us consider some representative material taken from the one hundred notebooks of the survey to understand how the Returned Yank of the Folklore Commission survey link history and memory.

### 1955 AND THE RETURNED YANK

The figure of the Returned Yank who emerges from the Folklore Commission interviews is always clean, well dressed, and eager to perform his or her mastery of modern ways. Men might wear bowler hats or panamas and villagers crowded Sunday mass to see a fashionable female Yank. A common remark was, "It must be a wonderful country and the fine decent clothes that comes from it." The most notable accessory proudly displayed by Returned Yanks was the gold watch. Watches potently symbolized the contrast between the Old World and the New and were almost always hung on a gold watch chain looped across a man's waistcoat, serving as a sign of wealth and modernity. Emigrants returning for a visit frequently brought watches (along with jewelry and "razors in boxes") as gifts. Watches, of course, were critical to success in industrialized society, which demanded that workers report to work on time. What use did the watch have in an agricultural society other than as an emblem of a foreign place or a successful family member? In rural Ireland, the symbolic meaning of the watch far outweighed its practical significance.

Informants of the survey differed in their appraisal of the Yanks' appearance. Some thought the clothes, caps, and watches demonstrated the



“opulence” of America – particularly those emigrants with multiple suits and dresses – others felt that returned emigrants put on airs with their displays of modern clothing. One informant said conclusively, “Returned Americans who wore any ‘loud’ clothes and had a pronounced accent were not favourably regarded and were made fun of behind their backs; whereas those who showed little change in dress or speech or manners were favourably commented on.”<sup>23</sup> Another reported that Returned Yanks “wore the best of clothes and they would hardly look at us home here in the bare feet. When you would see them you would say to yourself ‘now wasn’t I the fool didn’t go across for I would be coming home a great swank like that now.’”<sup>24</sup> And still another informant elaborately described one type of Yank as

the frivolous flippant dude dressed in the extreme of American fashion that the yanks adopted themselves that I have seen in cartoons all my life. The returned emigrant that I mean in this class, would have grand Clothes [*sic*]. Black cloth very loud pants white waistcoat adorned with all the tinsel that America was and is famous for. The massive watch chain across from pocket to pocket a seal or charm large as a thimble great gold or semigold links fastning [*sic*] his cuffs they extending about an inch beyond his coat sleeves [*sic*]. Diamonds real or faked holding the broad shirt front in position. A great diamond studded gold ring, real or fake as the case might be. This grandly dressed dude with his yankey [*sic*] drawl. If asked could he do so and so his reply would be, coming through his nose, waal. I guess, or you bet I can do it plenty good.<sup>25</sup>

Female Yanks, like their male counterparts, displayed up-to-date clothing – one informant alleged they inspired the transition from traditional shawls to more modern capes – as well as modern stoves and cooking methods. Dowries earned through years of domestic service in the United States particularly attracted husbands, thus underscoring that the female Yank posed no challenge to conventional domestic roles – although we might speculate that, considering women’s role in socializing children, the modernizing influence of returned women exceeded that of men (without evidence from the households of returned Yanks such an argument is beyond the scope of this article).

Comments on dress and behavior indicate that emigrants had mastered “respectable” middle-class mores while in the United States – or at least had learned the relationship between commodities and performed status. On returning to their communities in Ireland they attempted performances of affluence, material success, and social mobility. As importantly, neighbors observed that the Returned Yank had accepted the “time, work, discipline” of

<sup>23</sup> Irish Folklore Commission Questionnaires, MS 1407, 45. Information collected by Tadhg O’Murchadha, Waterville, Co. Kerry.

<sup>24</sup> Irish Folklore Commission Questionnaires, MS 1411, 35–6. Interview with Annie McColgan, Pollan, Ballyliffin, Co. Donegal.

<sup>25</sup> Irish Folklore Commission Questionnaires, MS 1408, 111. Information collected by Joseph Wade, Crookedwood Mullingan, Co. Westmeath.

an industrial society and frequently spoke approvingly of the work habits of Americans. These were, after all, people who had made a dramatic transition from a rural world where time was measured by agricultural rhythms and had adjusted (or not) to the demands of time told by the clock, punctuality, and hard work. One informant commented,

it may be worthy of note that nearly all returned Americans had developed sound traits of industry and initiative and a go-ahead character which was in peculiar contrast to the lackadaisical, easy and happy-go-lucky way of living which characterized their manner of life before they left home.<sup>26</sup>

Repeated references to the time, work, and discipline habits necessary for success in an industrial society testify to the historically accurate aspect of the interviews, as do memories shared by elderly interviewees of Yanks with experiences of the American Civil War and its immediate aftermath.<sup>27</sup> Yet, while continued references to watches demonstrate the way in which this particular symbol of modernity had become incorporated into the figure of the Yank, it is hard to believe that watches in 1955, even in rural Ireland, were such a startling sight. The significance of these memories of watches, stylish dresses, and boastful Yanks is less in their accuracy and more in their ability to allow the Irish to define themselves as *authentically* rural, communal, and old-fashioned by contrast to the *synthetic* modern, urban, and materialistic Yanks.<sup>28</sup>

## CONSTRUCTING AMERICA

To understand the complex roots of the Returned Yank figure in Irish culture it is important to consider how the Irish developed and maintained a vision of America as a place of wealth and opportunity. Even before the flood tide of famine emigration, indeed as early as the 1840s, writers like Thomas Mooney,

<sup>26</sup> Irish Folklore Collection Questionnaire, MSS 1409, 107. Information collected by Michael Corduff, Rosspoint, Ballina, Co. Mayo. In his study of the return migration of European emigrants, historian Mark Wyman acknowledges the conflict between industrial and preindustrial time in a chapter appropriately titled "Leaving the Land of Bosses and Clocks." Wyman, 107.

<sup>27</sup> Arnold Schrier writes that "the great majority of people interviewed were well advanced in years, generally in their seventies and eighties, since such people were the ones most likely to have had first-hand experiences of the phenomena under consideration." Schrier, *Ireland and the American Emigration 1850-1900*, 187 n. 1.

<sup>28</sup> Could the differences between the Returned Yank and the Irish reporting on the Yank simply mean different personalities migrate or stay? Are the adventuresome and those open to change the Irish who found themselves in America while their more traditional neighbors and siblings stayed home? Historian Patrick J. Blessing points to that particular aspect of Irish migration and suggests "relative pooled resources to send out younger and more energetic family members who earned and remitted sufficient funds to pay the fares of those who remained behind." Blessing, 530.

an Irish journalist known for his columns in the *Nation* and the *Boston Pilot*, created expectations for life in America. His advice letters to immigrants published in Irish newspapers promised “lots of available work for men and women,” but cautioned that success would only come to the temperate, the punctual, and the hardworking. In words that echoed his popular British contemporary Samuel Smiles,<sup>29</sup> Mooney told immigrants to save their wages and seek edifying amusements after work. In fact, Mooney promised that while both men and women labored hard during the day,

they attend all kinds of lectures, instructions, and amusements in the evening. The young girls who work in factories, or at trades in their own homes, pay superior teachers for the light and more elegant female accomplishments, such as singing, music, dancing, drawing and languages.<sup>30</sup>

Fanciful as this uplift image is, Mooney also offered practical advice. Workers were advised to save specifically to buy a farm – men should not drink and women should not buy “gewgaws’ of the milliners.” Once they owned property,

then dress as fine as your neighbours . . . but in the meantime, always be *cleanly* in your person, – on working days as well as on Sundays. Shave . . . cleanliness of face, shirt, and well mended working dress, are equal to the best written character you could bring from Ireland – and rather better, too, as you will find out in the course of a short time here.<sup>31</sup>

Mooney concluded that success in America was “not to be had without *exertion, mind, and enterprise* – above all *character*. No place on earth where an honest character is worth more than in America.”<sup>32</sup> Despite Mooney’s insistence that strength of character resulted in success in America, it is clear that for Mooney success was measured in material terms and presentation was equal to character.

By far the most important source of information about America for the Irish was “the American letter,” a ubiquitous feature of Irish village life from the eighteenth century onwards and a staple of sentimental fiction and illustrations. Although often correspondence between illiterate individuals, written by a scribe in America and read by a literate neighbor or priest in Ireland, such letters, historian Kerby Miller claims, “imparted objective and

<sup>29</sup> Samuel Smiles, *Self-Help: With Illustrations of Conduct and Character* (John Murray: London, 1860).

<sup>30</sup> Thomas Mooney, *Nine Years in America by Thomas Mooney: A Traveller for Several Years in the U. S. of A., the Canadas, and other British Provinces in A Series of Letters to his cousin Patrick Mooney A Farmer in Ireland* (Dublin, 1850), 15–16. Thanks to David Sim for directing me to Mooney’s book.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 137, original emphasis. For an excellent discussion of the link between character and class see Judy Hilkey, *Character Is Capital: Success Manuals and Manhood in Gilded Age America* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1997).

carefully balanced information concerning the United States and its comparative advantages for potential migrants.”<sup>33</sup> Letters refreshed memories of those who had left and brought remittances that saved countless family farms from bankruptcy. Money sent home provided powerfully tangible evidence of America as a place of wealth and opportunity and surely helped create a sense of an Ireland dependent upon American largesse for sustenance. The wealth and accomplishment demonstrated by the Returned Yanks of the Folklore Commission survey embody expectations created by essayists like Mooney and by the American letter.

### THE RETURNED YANK IN GAELIC REVIVAL AND FREE STATE LITERATURE

Admittedly, a robust literary stereotype of the Returned Yank existed in Ireland long before the Folklore Commission agents posed their questions in 1955. Indeed, as I have argued, the commonplace nature of that figure in Irish popular culture may have shaped the questions and answers of the survey.<sup>34</sup> As early as 1900 the Returned Yank had stepped onto the stage of Irish popular culture – quite literally in plays of the Gaelic revival, the nationalist cultural movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Just as the Returned Yank who is described in 1955 appeared at a conflicted time of Irish nationalism, the *pocan* or Returned Yank featured in innumerable plays, novels, and short stories, boasted of his wealth and – importantly for the nationalist writers of this period – betrayed the cause of incipient Irish nationalism by his absence. As Phillip O’Leary succinctly states, “positive images of Irish Americans in the Gaelic literature of the early years was [*sic*] virtually nonexistent.”<sup>35</sup>

While resentment, scorn, and anger color most essays pouring from the pens of nationalist writers of the Free State period (1922–39), some writers, aware of the substantial financial contribution that Irish “Yanks” made to the cause of Irish independence, created a more nuanced image of the Returned Yank. Indeed, one 1927 editorial chided Irish readers that “were it not for America and the great filial tradition that exists between that country and the children of the West there would be no Gailtacht [*sic*] left for us either

<sup>33</sup> Kerby A. Miller, “Paddy’s Paradox: Emigration to America in Irish Imagination and Rhetoric,” in Miller, *Ireland and Irish America: Culture, Class, and Transatlantic Migration* (Dublin: Field Day, 2008), 98–123, 101.

<sup>34</sup> One survey respondent specifically noted the Returned Yank trope in Maura Laverty’s novel *Never No More*.

<sup>35</sup> Philip O’Leary, “Yank Outsiders: Irish Americans in Gaelic Fiction and Drama of the Irish Free State, 1922–1939,” in Charles Fanning, ed., *New Perspectives on the Irish Diaspora*, (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2000), 253–65, 254.

to save or lose.”<sup>36</sup> While such writers implored the new government to limit the tide of Gaelic speakers flowing from traditionally Irish-speaking areas to America, they also produced cautionary tales in which Irish emigrants to America face challenges to their faith in the harsh American environment – a character more to pity than to scorn. Yet the slick Returned Yank persisted as a stock character in Free State fiction. The Yank of Peadar O Dubhda’s 1929 story “The Yank’s Complaint,” for example, foreshadows the well-presented Yank of the Folklore Commission survey with his flashy dress and prominent gold watch. He

was clean shaven and neatly groomed. And he was well dressed – dressed like a Yank: the colored little vest, you know, and the chain of yellow gold across his breast ... That mouthful of big, even teeth that had never been rooted there but that shift out of their places sometimes because of the talking – so that the yellow gold can be seen here and there.<sup>37</sup>

The period’s intense concern with Irish identity demanded that the Gaelic Revival and Free State construct a Returned Yank as false as the Yank’s teeth in O Dubhda’s story with an identity eviscerated by time spent in America.

## THE IMAGINARY IRELAND OF THE DIASPORA

Even before Irish independence, Ireland and the Irish diaspora existed in distinct but inexorably linked cultural spaces. As Oona Frawley asserts, “diasporic memory feeds back into and influences Irish identity in Ireland,”<sup>38</sup> and nowhere is this more apparent than in the countless songs popularized in vaudeville and published as sheet music or on piano rolls in the early and mid-twentieth century. In such tunes as “Come Back to Erin,” “Galway Bay,” and “I’ll Take You Home Again Kathleen,” Ireland emerges as a rural idyll shrouded in a perpetual Celtic mist. “Dear Old Donegal,” a rollicking tune popularized by American crooner Bing Crosby, promises an exuberant welcome for the emigrant from “all his friends and neighbours,” as well as from his family and “the girl he used to swing down on the garden gate” when he returns.<sup>39</sup> The powerful sentiments of longing and nostalgia expressed in these

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 260.

<sup>38</sup> Oona Frawley, *Memory Ireland*, Volume 1, *History and Modernity* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2011), xxi.

<sup>39</sup> Some of these songs originated in Ireland, some in America, some elsewhere. “Come Back to Erin,” popularized on the American vaudeville circuit, was written and composed in England by Charlotte Alington in 1866. Frank A. Fahey wrote one version of “Galway Bay” in the nineteenth century. It contains the lines “Tis far away I am today from scenes I roamed as a boy / And long ago the hour I know I first saw Illinois.” A better-known version was written by Dr. Arthur Colohan in 1947 and popularized by Bing Crosby. In 1876, one of the most popular songs in America was “I’ll Take You Home Again Kathleen,” written by Thomas Westendorf, an Illinois music teacher.

songs infused the Returned Yank site of memory with an additional cultural valence – the Yank by his or her return migration satisfies the intense longing of the exile for the homeland expressed in the many sentimental songs written in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It helps explain how, despite the “minuscule” size of return migration, the Returned Yank has assumed a cultural significance out of proportion to the phenomenon it represents and illustrates the cultural function of the site of memory.

*Lieux de mémoire*, according to historians Genevieve Fabre and Robert O’Meally, are “products of this interaction between history and memory, of the interplay between the personal and the collective . . . *lieux de mémoire* can prompt both the processes of imaginative recollection and the historical consciousness.”<sup>40</sup> For the Irish, the cultural function of the Yank is as a site where the tension between modernity and tradition, the politics of nostalgia, and the deep ambivalence the Irish felt about migration reside. They allow the Irish as well as the Irish of the diaspora to incorporate the loss of millions of emigrants to America and elsewhere while shaping for those emigrants the memory of an idyllic homeland. The complex relationship between history and memory in the Returned Yank is rooted in the contradiction that millions left Ireland, particularly in the early nineteenth century, and relatively few returned, yet one would be hard-pressed to find a more familiar and persistent trope than the Returned Yank in modern Irish culture.

## THE RETURNED YANK IN MID-CENTURY IRISH FICTION

The Irish Constitution, passed in 1937, enacted draconian censorship of books and films, rigid proscriptions against contraception and divorce, support for Gaelic as a national language, and irredentist claims on Northern Ireland. The IRA continued its internecine violence, creating political instability in the new republic. The Returned Yank motif appears in mid-century Irish fiction as a site where the repression and violence of the new republic can be explored. Two Irish novels published in the 1940s, Sean O’Faolain’s *Come Back to Erin* (1940) and Maura Laverty’s *Never No More* (1942), feature explicitly gendered representations of the Returned Yank to comment on the Yank’s meaning at mid-century.

*Come Back to Erin*, although published in 1940, is set in 1936. The novel tells of two brothers, Frankie and St. John Hogan Hannafey, who follow conventional masculine scripts – the brigand and the entrepreneur – set against the ambivalent meaning of emigration for Ireland in the 1930s. Frankie, an IRA gunman on the run, is trying to escape Ireland for America;

<sup>40</sup> O’Meally and Fabre, *History and Memory*, 5.

St. John, who emigrated from Cork to the United States as a boy and achieved entrepreneurial success, returns to Ireland for a visit thirty-two years after his departure. The one brother sees his move to America as an expedient exit from Ireland's violent troubles, the other romanticizes a quiescent Ireland as a balm for psychological wounds. Like most fictional Returned Yanks, St. John exudes wealth and modernity. He drives a "long cream Lincoln," an analogue for the gold watch of the Folklore Commission Yanks, and is happy to share quality whiskey.<sup>41</sup>

In a paradigmatic scene, the brothers find themselves watching a ship leaving for America. A bugle plays the mournful tune "Come back to Erin, Mavourneen, mavourneen / Come back to Erin the land of thy birth / Come back to Erin, the shamrock, and spring time ...". "In the old days," said Frankie, "there would be hundreds going." His brother responds,

"Draining us" ... and then at the thought his own life had been drained away ... his eyes flooded for the departing boat, for the sadness of the music, for himself, for Ireland, who was so old, and so weak, and so poor.<sup>42</sup>

Stephanie Rains could almost be describing St. John when she references the quintessential Irish American hero as a man traumatized not by war but by the "modern urban environments of the industrial city ... a particular American form of modernity."<sup>43</sup> St. John has found material success but not personal fulfilment in America. His return to Ireland reminds him of its poverty. Unable to reconcile his Irish and American identities, he returns to America and kills himself. Frankie flees to America, yet, as the song and novel's title suggests, comes back to Erin.

Romance rather than tragedy frames Maura Laverty's *Never No More*, in which the material sensuality of America transforms an Irish girl. The novel's protagonist, Maggie Doyle, has a sister who works as a domestic servant in America. She often sends Maggie boxes of her employer's cast-off clothing: "All kinds of lovely things came Maggie's way – furred coats, leather handbags, silk stockings, and clinging, vivid, wonderful frocks." The American clothing transformed Maggie and made a plain village girl into a desirable woman: "It was an American frock that first made Denis Carroll take notice of Maggie." Complicating the romantic narrative, Denis has his sights set on emigration to England. When a new box of clothing arrives that includes a sapphire chiffon chemise, "edged with the finest and most delicate of creamy lace through which was drawn a narrow velvet ribbon," Maggie tries it on and "realized her

<sup>41</sup> Sean O'Faolain, *Come Back to Erin* (London: Cape, 1940); see Lawrence J. McCaffrey, "Sean O'Faolain and Irish Identity," *New Hibernia Review*, 9, 4 (Winter 2005), 144–56.

<sup>42</sup> O'Faolain, 85.

<sup>43</sup> Stephanie Rains, *The Irish-American in Popular Culture, 1945–2000* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2007), 153.



body's beauty! the cool silky feel of the beautiful garment against her skin gave her an airy headiness." Emboldened by her costume, she steps outside the "confines of the smoky, peat-grimed little kitchen" to the moonlit garden and her lover's admiration.<sup>44</sup> Not surprisingly, her love-struck swain pledges he will never leave her. Sexually empowered by the liberatory bit of American silk, Maggie stops rather than initiates emigration.

Contemporary Irish history – the puritanical nature of Irish culture and the persistent violence of the IRA – continue to shape the Returned Yank narrative throughout the twentieth century.<sup>45</sup> Literary scholar Meredith Cary implicitly demonstrates the distinguishing features of the late twentieth-century Yank – direct involvement with terrorist activities of the IRA and sexual behavior at odds with traditional Irish values – in three novels from the 1980s. Ireland contributes the violence, in other words, and America the sex. The authors of all three novels depict Americans as childlike and naive, and, in Cary's words, "their passion focuses disconcertingly on sex rather than on politics."<sup>46</sup>

The infusion of sex and contemporary politics into the Returned Yank demonstrates the expansive possibilities of this site of memory. Decades earlier watches and clothing symbolized the contrast between Ireland and the diasporic culture; by mid-century and later the contrast is between the repressive nature of Irish culture and the freer sexuality of America, between the random terrorism of the troubles and the quiescence of American suburbia.

### THE QUIET MAN – THE APOTHEOSIS OF THE RETURNED YANK

The urtext of the Returned Yank is arguably John Ford's romantic comedy *The Quiet Man*. Filmed in Ireland and released in 1955, *The Quiet Man* follows Sean Thornton, played by John Wayne, a Yank returning to his natal

<sup>44</sup> Maura Laverty, *Never No More* (Templegate: London, 1942, 1988), 70–73. Critical assessments of Laverty's work can be found in Luke Gibbons, "From Kitchen Sink to Soap: Drama and the Serial Form on Irish Television," in *Transformations in Irish Culture* (Cork: University of Cork Press, 1996), 44–69, in the preface to the 1942 edition of *Never No More* by Sean O'Faolain, and the preface to the 1985 and 1992 Virago reissues of the novel by Maeve Binchy.

<sup>45</sup> Meredith Cary, "Going Home: The 'Returned Yank' in Irish and Irish-American Fiction" *Colby Quarterly*, XXIX, 1 (March, 1993), 57–67. The novels are: Maeve Binchy, *Firefly Summer* (New York, 1988), James Hynes, *The Wild Colonial Boy* (New York, 1990), and Julia O'Faolain, *No Country for Young Men* (New York, 1986).

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 62. Cary also makes the point that some American characters in the novels she analyzes seem unaware of the matriarchal tradition in Ireland – they urge the Irish, particularly Irish women, to "work on" their appearance to become more attractive to men, a clear example of a contemporary culture in which women's value is largely their attractiveness to men.

village, Inishfree, sometime in the 1920s. Asked by villagers, “What are you after Yank?” Thornton responds that Inishfree “has become another word for heaven for me.” We learn gradually that, like St. John Hogan Hannafey, the New World has damaged Thornton – a boxer, he killed a man in a fight – so his journey is more than a search for his roots. As Stephanie Rains observes, Thornton “seeks recuperation, and completeness with his return to Ireland.”<sup>47</sup> Once in Inishfree, like a typical Returned Yank, he demonstrates his affluence by buying White O’Morn Cottage, his mother’s birthplace, and drinks for everyone in the village pub. A villager confirms Thornton’s Returned Yank status with the comment: “He’s a millionaire like all the Yanks.”

*The Quiet Man*’s narrative centers on Thornton’s courtship of Mary Kate Danaher, a spirited flame-haired beauty played by Maureen O’Hara. Falling in love at first sight of Mary Kate, Thornton confronts traditional gender conventions that make his integration into Inishfree less seamless than he anticipated. Thornton says, “In America I would honk the horn and a girl would come a runnin’.” By contrast, courtship in Inishfree means a chaperoned outing in a jaunting car. Following a traditional gender script, Mary Kate refuses to marry without her brother’s consent – “this is not America,” she tells Thornton. Thornton sees no need for his wife’s money but is convinced of its importance to Mary Kate when she refuses to consummate the marriage until the dowry – the “bride’s fortune” – is returned.

In the film’s climactic sequence, Sean fights his recalcitrant brother-in-law Red Will Danaher in a comic donnybrook that draws spectators from near and far. Sean wins, Red Will returns the dowry to Mary Kate, and, the point being made, the couple burn the money. Sean and his brother-in-law then get drunk and stumble back to the Thornton cottage where Mary Kate happily serves them dinner. In the film’s final scene, Sean literally breaks with convention when he breaks the rod that a neighbor has given him to keep his wife in line. The Returned Yank and his Irish bride stand on the brink of a hopeful, new Ireland – ravishing natural beauty, leprechaun-like villagers, true love, and the modernity provided by the Returned Yank. The sentimental soundtrack reinforces the message that the Yank can come home, and by doing so fuses the two halves of the diaspora.

Contemporary Irish studies scholars have read *The Quiet Man* through the lenses of postcolonial theory, of “the politics of nostalgia,” and of gender, and

<sup>47</sup> Stephanie Rains, *The Irish-American in Popular Culture, 1945–2000* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2007), 153. Maeve Connolly also references the gendered aspects of *The Quiet Man* with the comment that Sean Thornton “sought to recover a past coded in maternal terms.” Maeve Connolly, “‘A Bit of Traveller in Everybody’: Traveller Identities in Irish and American Culture,” in Diana Negra, ed., *The Irish in Us: Irishness, Performativity, and Popular Culture* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2006), 282–317, 303.

of course in light of its meaning for Ireland at the time of its release.<sup>48</sup> While Luke Gibbons points out that *The Quiet Man* is the “bane of Irish cinema” for many Irish directors, one element of Irish society embraced the film – Bord Failte, the Irish Tourist Board. Gibbons claims that

*The Quiet Man* can justly lay claim to be the film that launched a thousand ships – and planes – in search of its imaginary Ireland, as it became virtually a master narrative in Bord Failte’s promotion of Ireland abroad, especially for the American market.<sup>49</sup>

Films, travelogues, and documentaries cloned the storyline of *The Quiet Man* multiple times to stimulate cultural and “roots” tourism by presenting an Ireland of friendly natives and quaint villages – the antithesis of modernity.<sup>50</sup> By playing a central role in promoting the appeal of Ireland as a tourist destination, this fulfilling narrative enabled the figure of the Returned Yank to step into the market economy as an active participant in the increasingly lucrative tourism industry.

#### THE RETURNED YANK ENTERS THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY: EPILOGUE

Ireland’s entry into the European Union (EU) in 1973 inaugurated a period of unprecedented economic growth for the Republic of Ireland. Almost overnight it seemed Ireland went from being one of the most culturally backward nations in Europe to one of its hippest.<sup>51</sup> About ten years after entering the EU, Ireland suffered an economic downturn accompanied by high rates of unemployment, which sent significant numbers of Irish men and women on well-worn paths of migration to the United States, the United Kingdom, and elsewhere. By 1996, the roar of the Celtic Tiger, as Ireland’s late twentieth-century economic renaissance was called, attracted emigrants home, particularly to rural Ireland. Two texts from this period illustrate the resilience of the Returned Yank as a site of memory in a recent historical landscape very different from the one sketched by the Folklore Commission in 1955.

A distinctive feature of these texts – the first a set of emigrant life narratives and the second a television documentary – is their ability to give voice to the Returned Yank experience and allow us to shift our focus from the *perception*

<sup>48</sup> Luke Gibbons, *The Quiet Man* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2002), 47–49.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 91. Gibbons provides an extended analysis of two of these films, *The Field* (1990) and *This Is My Father* (1997). He further claims that *Angela’s Ashes* (1999) “reverses” *The Quiet Man* by “looking to America as the answer to Ireland’s ills.”

<sup>50</sup> It would be interesting and instructive to compare African American tourism to African slave forts as a similar *lieu de mémoire*.

<sup>51</sup> On Ireland during this period see Roy Foster, *Luck and the Irish: A Brief History of Change from 1970* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

and *construction* of Returned Yanks in fiction and Folklore Commission interviews to the actual *experience* of returning migrants themselves. Moreover, while many texts discussed earlier in this essay are certainly gender-minded, these contemporary texts express a gendered experience in ways not seen in earlier representations, which lends credence to feminist sociologist Breda Gray's assertion that "gender is the defining Irish cultural difference."<sup>52</sup> While we might take issue with the boldness of Gray's claim, nonetheless, these texts strongly demonstrate the differences between women's and men's experiences of migration and return.

Feminist historians writing in the 1990s and later cast a critical light on the role that Free State and Republican policies played in encouraging traditional female roles while historian Roy Foster underlines the powerful role feminism, with its critique of sexual oppression and limited opportunities for women, played in bringing modernity to Ireland in the 1960s and afterwards. Two contemporary texts of migration and return – the first, cultural geographer Caitriona Ni Laoire's study of migrants who left Ireland and returned to settle in the mid-1990s, and the second, the television documentary *The Irish Empire* – echo these feminist sensibilities and shift the focus of the Irish from the *perception* of Returned Yanks to the *experience* of returning migrants themselves.<sup>53</sup>

Ni Laoire's life narratives of returning emigrants infuse subjectivity into the Returned Yank,<sup>54</sup> almost as though we could title her study "The Returned Yank Speaks." Ni Laoire contends that "rural return migrants are positioned somewhere between locals and incomers," and their narratives can be understood "in terms of discourses of rurality, in particular through notions of a rural idyll and belonging/not belonging."<sup>55</sup> She demonstrates that a move back to modern Ireland is almost certainly disappointing for the modern migrant who arrives with "counterurban" fantasies of idyllic communities promising "safety, space, and nature" which are "bound up with

<sup>52</sup> Breda Gray, "Global Modernities and the Gendered Epic of the Irish Empire," in Sara Ahmed *et al.*, eds., *Uprootings/Regroundings: Questions of Home and Migration* (Berg: Oxford and New York, 2003), 157–78.

<sup>53</sup> Contemporary scholarship increasingly demonstrates the gendered experience of migration. See, for example, Pauric Travers, "Emigration and Gender: The Case of Ireland 1922–1960," in Mary O'Dowd and Sabine Wichert, eds., *Chattel, Servant or Citizen: Women's status in Church, State and Society* (Belfast: The Institute of Irish Studies, 1995), 187–199; and Grace Neville, "Dark Lady of the Archives: Toward an Analysis of Women and Emigration to North America in Irish Folklore," in *ibid.*, 200–14; Mary Ryan, "A Feminism of Their Own? Irish Women's History and Contemporary Irish Women's Writing," *Estudios Irlandeses*, 5 (2010), 91–101. Foster, 38–56.

<sup>54</sup> Caitriona Ni Laoire, "The 'Green Green Grass of Home'? Return Migration to Rural Ireland," *Journal of Rural Studies*, 23 (2007), 332–34.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 332.

heteronormative values of the nuclear family and the rearing of children in the countryside.”<sup>56</sup>

The testimony of Ni Laoire’s informants evokes many of the aspects of the Returned Yank trope – the longing for an idyllic homeland, the emigrant altered during their time elsewhere (in this case, emotionally or mentally rather than in appearance), and an inevitable disappointment upon return. They seem to have imbued the “fantasies of Ireland” noted by Diane Negra in “a staggering variety of consumable forms” which “posit a culture unsullied by consumerism and modernity.”<sup>57</sup> Yet the contrast between the historical circumstances of Ni Laoire’s subjects and those interviewed by the Irish Folklore Commission in 1955 is striking. Ni Laoire characterizes return migrants of the late twentieth century as middle class. And, while as “driven by the constructions of a rural idyll” as “Yanks” of the early and mid-twentieth century, these modern migrants show a contradictory reluctance to actually live in the countryside. These contemporary returnees share the inchoate longing for home and the pull of family obligations that motivated earlier returnees, but, by contrast, seek to escape the “individualism and materialism” they experienced while abroad rather than the “bosses and clocks” so prominent in earlier narratives. Unlike earlier generations of Returned Yanks, Ni Laoire’s informants, enabled by cheap flights and budget airlines, regularly visited Ireland during the time they lived abroad. Despite knowledge of modern Ireland, they still express as sentimentally powerful a sense of what they hope to find when they returned home as Yanks of decades earlier. The contradiction between their first-hand knowledge of late twentieth-century Ireland and their idyllic expectations testifies to the resilient cultural power of memory embedded in the Returned Yank figure.

Once settled in Ireland, more realistic expectations did not guarantee easy integration into Irish society for modern migrants. Women who returned experienced “some loss of gendered autonomy” in Ireland’s tradition-bound society. Others felt simply confined – as one married woman put it, “I remember my husband used to look out the window and he’d say ‘look at the lovely view’ and I used to think ‘God! I’m going crazy here!’”<sup>58</sup> Finally, returnees expressed disappointment at Ireland’s transformation by the economic boom. Rather than finding the warmth and community of their imagined idyll most found instead the “individualism and materialism” that they thought they left in behind in America or Britain.

The Irish labeled the contemporary migrant a “Returned Yank” as easily in the 1990s as they had fifty years before and earlier – the returnee who displays

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>57</sup> Diane Negra, “Introduction,” in Negra, *The Irish in Us*, 3.

<sup>58</sup> Negra, *The Irish in Us*, 339.

affluence through conspicuous consumption. And the “Yanks” reported their resentment and sense of “not belonging.” As expressed by returnee “Marie”: “In one way you’re not different, in another you are – you’re the one that came back from the States.”<sup>59</sup>

The Returned Yanks who appear in the television documentary *The Irish Empire* echo “Marie’s” sentiment. Not surprisingly, the Returned Yank plays a prominent role amongst themes of migration, nostalgia, and return in this popular coproduction (RTE–BBC–SBS). Sociologist Breda Gray argues that the series effectively uses mass media as a vehicle for bringing “histories and memories together to form new *lieux de mémoire*.”<sup>60</sup> Like Ni Laoire’s study, *The Irish Empire* gives voice to returned migrants and demonstrates their inherently gendered experience.

*The Irish Empire* devotes one of five segments to women in the Irish diaspora. It profiles Mary Williams, who migrated to the United States in the 1940s from rural Ireland and returned in the 1950s. Williams found that her modern sensibilities set her apart from her family and others. She recalls criticism of her clothing, for example, and says: “for instance, I had nylon see-through blouses and they were all the rage in America, but they weren’t the rage at home and I was treated very differently. I couldn’t sort of be myself at all there.”<sup>61</sup> Identified in the film as a Returned Yank, Mary leaves Ireland in 1953 for work in Britain, where she settles and starts a family. As Breda Gray comments, “Mary’s original exclusion through migration as a response to restricted opportunities for women in Ireland is repeated when Mary’s choice of clothes sexualize and suggest a relationship of enjoyment to her gendered body and mark her as an outsider.”<sup>62</sup> Gray’s feminist analysis, indeed Mary’s own memory of her second departure from Ireland, complicates and sexualizes the notion of the Returned Yank as site of memory with a Returned Yank’s actual memory rather than simply a memory of a Returned Yank.<sup>63</sup>

## CONCLUSION

The Returned Yank in all his or her manifestations, whether in fact or in fiction, on the screen or in interviews, allows us to expand the analytic possibilities of the site of memory. Unlike in Pierre Nora’s monumental exegesis, *Realms of Memory*, which identifies *lieux de mémoire* as a key

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 341.

<sup>60</sup> Gray, 157.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 168.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 169.

<sup>63</sup> Colim Toibin’s best selling novel *Brooklyn*, a Returned Yank narrative, appeared after I had completed research for this article and further testifies to the resiliency of the Returned Yank trope. Its protagonist, Eilis Lacey, leaves Ireland for 1950s New York. There she encounters modernity and sexual liberation. When she returns to Ireland thinking she might stay she finds she is more comfortable in multi-ethnic New York so returns to Brooklyn rather than to Eire.

component of French national identity, the Returned Yank is not an explicit nationalist project. Sean Thornton's return to Inishfree is not the same endeavor as when the "Third Republic's public schools turned *patois*-speaking peasants into French-speaking citizens."<sup>64</sup> Unlike in Nora's *Realms of Memory*, in which, as historian Hue-Tam Ho Tai tells us, although "there may be many perspectives on France . . . They have only one object. This is a France that is indivisible,"<sup>65</sup> the Returned Yank has multiple objects. Yet while the Returned Yank, unlike Nora's subject, is not part of some *official* project creating national identity as the stuff of memory, the figure of the Yank cannot be divorced from Ireland's history of migration, population loss, social change, political turmoil, and national identity. The paucity of immigrants who actually returned to Ireland from America enhances, I contend, the *cultural* force of the Returned Yank as a site of memory. The Returned Yank in all his or her manifestations memorializes the diasporic nature of Irish culture and the historical reality of massive and ongoing migration. As evidenced in contemporary Irish cultural production, the plaintive refrain of the sentimental song "Come Back to Erin" continues to resonate in Irish history and culture and to be an essential part of a national identity that inexorably includes loss.

<sup>64</sup> Tai, "Remembered Realms," 913.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 910.